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ABSTRACT

In expository writing, making an outline may prove helpful, but it is just as likely to prove inhibiting. While traditional textbooks advocate making a formal outline, recent studies, books, and articles question the value of formal outlining for all students. Alternatives to the formal outline include making only a rough plan or sketchy lists of points to be covered, writing first and then literally cutting up the material to organize it, and informally discussing a topic on tape and then listening, making notes, retaping, and so on until the material is ready to be written in final form. (JM)

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Session B 12, NCTE Convention, November 26, 1976

"To Outline or Not to Outline" - John A. Higgins

Summary

Traditionally, teachers have urged or forced students to construct a formal outline consisting of Roman numerals, capital letters, and so forth, in good parallel structure, at some point before beginning to write a composition of three or more paragraphs. Many textbooks still include outlining as a required step in the composing process. The usual arguments for outlining are that it enables the student to see his paper as a whole - the forest instead of just the trees; that it prevents him from wandering off the topic; that it imposes a discipline on him, guaranteeing the logical sequence and proportionate development of ideas and the proper subordination of secondary to main ideas.

Yet quite a few recent studies and composition texts seriously question the value of formal outlining for all students. It has been discovered, for example, that a sizeable portion of professional writers as well as students produce successful writing from various kinds of informal plans or no written plan at all. Outlining has even been attacked as a block rather than an aid to successful composing, in that it stifles spontaneity, discovery and change during the writing itself.

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A number of alternate means of planning written papers have been suggested. These include "just beginning" to write, then literally cutting up and re-ordering the material; and "talking" the paper into a tape recorder before writing.

Students should be exposed to and encouraged to try different types of planning until they find the kind that works best for them.

HIGGINS B12

To Outline or Not to Outline

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To Outline or Not to Outline

John A. Higgins

About ten years ago, when I was struggling in the early stages of my doctoral dissertation - on F. Scott Fitzgerald's short stories - I was required to make an outline of what I intended to write. After much struggle I produced a masterpiece - one that Rube Goldberg would have been proud of: fifteen typewritten pages, single spaced! - with so many levels of subdivisions that I couldn't find a text to tell me how to label them. After my committee had nodded its approval, I sat down, took a long look at the outline - then threw it out and wrote the whole dissertation without any outline.

Now I'm not claiming James Joyce's powers of total recall. It's just that I realized it would be better - easier, really - to treat Fitzgerald's stories in straight chronological order, rather than aspect by aspect, as I had outlined, and I found a new formal outline unnecessary, although I did make informal lists of points to remember.

This incident, I think, illustrates the dilemma of the outline: On the one hand, some writers, both student and experienced, find it an inhibiting corset forcing their writing into a shape unnatural to their style and subject, and difficult to wiggle out of. ~~Yet~~ they can write quite well without outlining, as I intend to show. On the other hand, outlining can prove highly valuable, as it did in my case; for when my original intention was spread out before me in outline, I saw that it would lead to much redundancy in my dissertation, as well as excessive work.

Should teachers, then, require outlining? Or is the outline dead, to be replaced by less structured forms of planning or no form at all? What are the

texts and the studies saying? What does experience show? And what does common sense tell us? The question is important, first, because we teachers must always strain to find those instructing techniques that will help our students most, and second, because if outlining does not work then we are at the least wasting class time badly needed for 'God-knows-how-many other things, or at the worst retarding students' writing development by forcing a useless and perhaps harmful activity on them.

I'm limiting this discussion to expository writing, in its broad sense: explanatory, argumentative, descriptive, and narrative essays - the usual composition types and excluding the more fluid genres such as stream-of consciousness narrative, fiction, and poetry. Formal outline refers to a written plan - normally in the Harvard, Roman - number form - that divides the topic into sections and, usually, subsections. The term planning includes not only outlining but any other pre-writing activity concerned with organizing a paper. Our discussion will necessarily spill over into the whole area of planning for writing.

The traditional textbook approach to planning says to make a formal written outline somewhere after forming a central idea and before writing a first fraft. Most secondary school texts still adhere to this. The most recent edition of Warriner's famous Complete Course (1973), for example, says "Make an Outline" - without qualification - when writing any composition, not just a research paper. No other way of planning is treated. Warriner's eighth - grade text says basically the same.

The Macmillian English Series, 11 (1964), likewise advocates formal outlining, and Enjoying English (1966) tells students to use a formal outline (without subdivisions) even for a single paragraph.

Other authorities, however, are less rigid, offering alternatives that I'll mention in a few minutes.

College composition texts, whose publishers often respond more quickly to new ideas because the individual instructor can usually adopt a new text whenever he wishes, have shown in recent years a greater flexibility in the planning procedures they advocate. Yet the traditional call for outlining still appears in many. McCrimmon's well-known Writing with a Purpose (4th ed., 1967) gives a whole chapter to formal outlining "after serious study of the topic" for critical and research papers, and, for shorter papers, usually "tentative gropings..... which may finally emerge as a more sophisticated outline." The very popular Harbrace College Handbook (7th ed., 1972) says that "a formal outline may not be required for every paper," but advocates it, and gives no option in research papers. The model research paper in nearly every college freshman composition text I have seen shows a formal outline preceding the body of the paper. And most texts suggest no other method of planning a paper.

A number of recent books and articles that discuss the composing process, however, have attacked formal outlines. Simmons, Shafer, and West, in Decisions about the Teaching of English (1976), oppose the "elaborately organized superstructure" of formal outlines, especially in personal compositions. "An outline," they say, "should never add to the burden of a person who is learning to compose." An outline does, however, they point out, prevent the writer from "having to do two things at once."

Stephen Judy, in the English Journal (1970) and in his book Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English (1974) opposes formal outlining. In the former article he says "when [students] are told to make a formal outline before they write, they may well learn outlining form but the natural form of

their writing will be distorted into an arbitrary hyper-structured pattern."

Now - does student practice conform to what the traditional textbooks preach, or is it really much looser, as the critics of outlining say it should be?

The students who write the composition first and then the outline to fit it, because the teacher required one, are known to us all. In a 1975 study, McKee reported that nearly all his students in a technical writing class admitted they had written their outlines after their papers because they found they were unable to write one beforehand. But - are retro-outlined papers always bad ones? If not, that's telling us something! And even if a student shows us a perfectly put-together outline in flawless parallel structure, and later produces an A composition perfectly following that outline, can we conclude that the outline necessarily caused the A quality of the final paper - at least in its organization? A student whose mind is sharp enough to produce a clear, logical outline may well be capable of producing the same composition without putting an outline on paper. We should not be guilty of post hoc reasoning here. McKee's study concluded, "The clearer the thinker, the briefer the outline."

Conversely, many weaker students, like McKee's technical writing class, simply cannot cope with the logical rigors of the formal outline. A student will not necessarily improve a poorly organized paper by outlining. He may just as well produce a poorly organized outline. I'm sure you've seen as many as I have. The time such students spend struggling to learn outlining - especially parallelism - might better be spent on lessons in logic itself. Let us attack the disease, not the symptom. There is no basis, then, for assuming a necessary cause-effect relationship between outline and paper.

But does empirical study indicate any such relation? There is very little research on students' actual planning habits. The study you may be most familiar with is Janet Emig's 1971 monograph on her case-studies of the composing process of twelfth-graders. Emig first asked well-known professional and academic writers how they composed. She received sixteen answers from writers as diverse as John Ciardi and B.F. Skinner. Only four of the sixteen followed the standard textbook approach, including formal outlining. Most of the others made some kind of informal plan, and opposed "any plan that totally pre-figures a piece of writing." Almost all these authors agreed that any school training in formal outlining they received was having "no influence on their current planning practices."

Emig then examined 109 expository themes of 25 eleventh-grade students. She found that only 40 of these themes had been planned on paper beforehand, and that only 9 of these plans had been formal outlines. Most important, she found "no correlation between the presence or absence of any outline [formal or informal] and the grade a student receives evaluating how well organized that theme is." The catch in this survey, though, is that the students were from an honor class.

Continuing with an in-depth case-study of the composing activities of eight twelfth-graders (mostly above-average students), Emig concluded that "able student writers voluntarily do little or no formal written prefiguring, such as a formal outline," for pieces of school-sponsored writing of 500 or fewer words.

In the only study I have found directly on outlining, in the little-known Journal of English Teaching Techniques, McKee (1975) focusing on

technical writing, surveyed 180 members of the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers, and found that only five percent used a formal sentence outline, although the technical writing texts advocated it. At the other extreme, just five percent said they made no written plan, that they were able to plan entirely in their head or use the "faucet" approach - start writing until the faucet runs dry. The remaining 90 percent did make some kind of less formal word or phrase topic outline. The respondents stressed that each person should experiment and find out which approach works best for him. One said he did a rough draft before outlining. One brainstormed first. One wrote a summary before outlining. One used the tape recorder.

There are only a very few other investigations in the area. One is Stallard's (1974), which showed only that better writers spend more time in planning. Another is Culpepper-Hagen's (1950); The validity of her study is questionable, according to Research in Written Composition.

Emig's and McKee's studies, then, though not proving any method a guarantee of success, show that many writers - student and professional - can and do write successfully without a formal outline. To further test whether this is true, I ran my own survey about a month ago, using a group of men and women who have been trained in expository writing and who have to be successful in it to keep their jobs - the faculty at my college, where not to publish is most assuredly to perish. There were 55 replies out of about 200 faculty. The faculty replying average about 16 years of writing experience (for graduate school and for publication). They have written, on the average, 13 pieces of expository prose apiece in the last five years - a total of almost 600 pieces of writing and over 700 years of experience. The survey showed - with figures rounded off - that 2/5 of the

respondents said they did use a formal outline before any draft. One - third said they made an informal list, and 1/4 used no written plan at all before they wrote a draft. Almost all used the same form regardless of length or type of paper.

Of those who made written plans, just over 1/5 did so right after determining the topic, and about 3/5 after assembling data or jotting notes. Over 1/5 did not make any written plan until after writing a draft. Two - thirds of the planners said they adhered closely to their ~~outline~~ plan during the writing of the paper. Almost 2/3 said they had not changed their planning habits over the years, and of the remaining third, just half moved toward the more formal and half toward the less formal. The feeling against outlining was summed up by one of the latter: "Too much outlining inhibits flexibility, especially in the early stages of writing." By the way, on all the questions, it was the English faculty who leaned most toward freer, less formal ways of planning.

These studies, therefore, show a wide spectrum of planning activities by successful writers. They show that there is no universal best way to plan a paper, and that we can neither insist on formal outlining as the only route to a good paper nor relegate outlining to the same dustbin into which we've thrown sentence diagramming. They show that each student must decide on his own best method of preparing a paper.

It follows that our responsibility as teachers is to expose our classes to, and see that they try, as many practical ways of planning as we know, in the way that a batting coach guides a young baseball player in experimenting with various batting stances until the youth finds the stance that is most comfortable and productive for him - or her - whether orthodox or "way out." In the remaining time I will run down some of the alternatives to formal

pre-writing outlining that have been suggested by recent authorities or by experience.

First, why not examine our own planning? If you use a method other than the formal outline in writing your graduate papers or journal articles, why not show that method to your students - even have them plan a section of one of your papers with you? I hope you will mention some alternate methods during our discussion period. How did I plan this paper, for example? By writing every idea that was in my head or my notes on a separate sheet of loose leaf - sometimes a sentence, sometimes one or more paragraphs - then shuffling the sheets into order. I tried at least three different orders before I was satisfied. Finally, I added an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion. There are all kinds of other ways. I remember reading of one author - Fitzgerald or Faulkner, I think - who had a clothesline strung across his study with sections of his manuscript hanging from it by clothespins, trying to determine the best sequence for a novel he was writing. Why not physical manipulation of ideas? I'll come back to that idea in a minute.

As one alternate approach, what's wrong with the old student practice of writing the composition first and making the outline from it? - as long as the student uses the outline as a check on the organization of his paper, and revises the paper if the outline shows the organization faulty.

Several texts now suggest only a rough plan or just a sketchy list as sufficient planning. Sheridan Baker's The Practical Stylist (3rd ed., 1973), notes that "formal outlines, especially those made too early in the game, can make more time than they are worth," and suggests arranging cards containing notes, then listing major headings and leaving space between them to jot down ideas. Paul and Golone's Perception and Persuasion (1973) suggests only

a rough outline from notes, even for a research paper: just a title in question form, a 1-2-3-4-5 listing, and a concluding statement in answer to the question. Although these are college texts, some high school texts, as well as the New York State K-12 composition curriculum say merely to have students list the ideas to be included in a composition, and do not consider formal outlining.

One text that takes time to consider the problem some students may have with outlining is Walter Meyers' Handbook of Contemporary English (1974), for college freshmen. In discussing the research paper he notes that "many students find [outlining] difficult, if not impossible, to use." He sees two flaws in outlining. "First, . . . it is entirely possible that you do not know exactly what you are going to say until you have said it." (This brings to mind the lady in E.M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel, who exclaimed, "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?") "In writing," Meyers continues, "part of the process of thinking the subject through involves putting it into words - actually writing something about it." The writer's idea can take shape only when it is externalized, when it is out of the writer's head and onto the paper."

"Second, an outline . . . can chain a writer" because "the creative act of writing itself can engender new ideas," and the student getting such an idea has to either rewrite his outline or drop the idea. Meyers suggests a non-directive approach (like that of Carl Rogers) for students who cannot work well with an outline: Just "begin to write anything at all about the topic . . ..Exactly what you write matters less than the physical act of writing and the mental action of putting your thought into words" - about half again as many words as required. The next step is to group related ideas - "physically, if you like, by cutting the pages

apart." Take one group of sentences and "try to summarize in one statement the idea of that group." This becomes the outline; then on to the first draft.

Some of the respondents in my survey followed approaches somewhat like this. Two free-wrote extensively; one of them then sorted her ideas into paragraphs, cut and pasted, and from the paste-up made a sentence outline. Others simply wrote several drafts, with informal plans evolving as they wrote. One wrote various paragraphs as he came across ideas, then arranged them. Another wrote separate ideas on separate cards.

Golub and Reising (1975) suggest brainstroming as the central planning activity, following extensive classroom discussion. The whole class practices with arranging the list of brainstormed ideas on the board.

Stallard (1976), an opponent of early outlining because it leads to "undeveloped papers," suggests free association - oral, taped, or jotted - with exploration of these ideas on paper, followed by shuffling and juxtaposing of elements until the student can see no further change. Only then does he make a written plan.

Zoellner, in a 1969 monograph to which College English gave an entire issue, advocates a "talk-write" approach, in which a listener aids a speaker in writing down the best of what he says in an oral discussion of the topic. This continues through repeated honing until the writer has transformed his unorganized talk into a well-knit piece of writing. Zoellner does not mention outlining as part of the process.

A variation of Zoellner's method is suggested by Snipes (1973) in which he advocates using a tape recorder in a "talk-retalk-write-rewrite" sequence. The student talks freely and randomly on the topic into a

recorder (either alone or to others); he listens to the playback, making brief notes on content and order; he then re-talks and re-plays; only then does he make a brief outline, and then only if he wishes.

Notice the emphasis on oral planning in Zoellner and these others. It is based on the idea that a student can express himself much more naturally in speaking informally than in writing. Kytle (1970) has a variation on this approach. He favors an oral question-answer dialogue with the instructor, with another student, or within the writer himself, after which the student may make a brief outline from what he discovers.

Going further afield, Weiner (1974) proposes non-verbal ways of planning writing, such as collages and photo essays, or multi-media photo-tape compositions. Though he presents these methods as long-distance lead-ups to writing rather than as planning for a particular written composition, a written paper could come as a follow-up from one of these projects.

The evidence, then indicates that though the formal outline is not dead, it is no longer monarch. Though helpful to some students, it should not be required of all. Moreover, outlining, when done, might better be done later in the composing process than we teachers have customarily been telling students to place it - after one or more drafts, or at least after some exploratory free composition.

Our role is to help each student find his best way - or ways - to plan papers. We can do this by exposing to classes various means of planning, such as those suggested here and others I'm sure you can think of - <u>including the formal outline</u> - but not to force him into using any one form - except that we should, I believe, insist, like a mother feeding her child vegetables, that he try each kind.

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